Students at the Center of the Computer-Assisted Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Incorporating classroom technology involves substantial investments of equipment, time, space, and technical support. This presentation traces the efforts at implementing technology in the freshman writing program at UNO, and speculates on how to best plan for the future. My goal is to encourage communication and strategic planning among colleagues across departments so that the use of technology in our classrooms fosters student-centered, applied learning experiences.

Where do we stand?

In 1998-1999, the University of New Orleans English department created a computer-assisted composition classroom (CACC), containing twenty-one computers, a projector, and an interactive whiteboard that allowed users to annotate and manipulate text onscreen. Software allowed instructors to monitor students’ computer use and project their work onscreen, fostering a collaborative atmosphere. The classroom proved popular with students, so grant money was requested and a second CACC was created.

The two rooms accommodated one-tenth of UNO’s writing sections, but this narrow focus had benefits:

- Self-selected instructors were self-motivated and collaborative, sharing experiences and practices via workshops and a newsgroup.
- Mostly self-selected pools of students were basically familiar with email, internet browsing, and Microsoft Word. Those who were not were encouraged to transfer to a conventional section or take skills workshops on campus.

There were drawbacks:

- CACCs were rare on campus and knowledgeable students didn’t cross-pollinate among departments.
- Few students were familiar with Blackboard classroom software.
- Students would take up to two weeks to acquire their user accounts.
- Technical problems were mostly relegated to the university’s Help desk, and could take a week to fix.

Freshmen enrolling at UNO are leaving high schools where computers are routinely used in instruction, and they are accustomed to workplaces where computers are the core tools for communication and collaborative efforts. In response to this need, UNO opened four new classrooms in Fall 2003; now, 40 percent of our composition sections are taught in computer classrooms, along with most technical writing sections, and several professional writing and journalism sections. This means

- Most faculty will have to teach in a CACC; however,
  - Some resist using technology for writing instruction.
  - Others require extensive support.
All resent losing class time while adjusting to equipment and software.

- Students no longer self-select, so we can’t redirect those with poor computer skills. However, student experiences have been mostly positive:
  - New freshmen are accustomed to writing with computers and using the internet.
  - Many have used Blackboard.
  - Many have the same tools at home that they find in our computer classrooms.
  - Students are an excellent resource for peer computer assistance.
  - Students now receive their user accounts at registration.
  - Registration interfaces with Blackboard to create a site for every course.

How do computer classrooms foster student-centered writing instruction?

“Student-centered learning is where students work both in groups and individually to explore problems and become active knowledge workers rather than passive knowledge recipients” (Harmon & Hirumi, 1996).

CACC students write more, revise more, and collaborate more than students in conventional classrooms:

- Students continue working on digital documents outside of the classroom; the classroom therefore expands beyond its spatial and temporal frames.
- Students exchange digital documents easily for peer review.
- Students use email and Blackboard to seek instructor input on works in progress.
- Students write more frequently, and collaboratively.
  - Shy students benefit from using a Discussion Board.
  - Students who shirk discussion have to respond in writing on Discussion Boards.
  - Students project their writing onscreen for immediate response.
- In the conventional classroom, the tools for writing and researching are fragmented:
  - Citation and formatting lessons are abstract.
  - Research skills are similarly abstract, save perhaps for a library tour.
  - More writing and revision are done outside of class than in it.
- In a CACC, research and writing tools are at hand, mirroring students’ home writing environments.
  - Instructors can demonstrate proper citation and format methods.
  - Research becomes a tool for answering questions and exploring ideas on the spot, rather than just a step required in a paper.
  - Revision is a natural part of writing with a word processor.
The writing process and its production goals are thus integrated.

- In CACCs, students typically arrive early and often must be urged to leave when the bell rings.

Even in the student-centered universe, students want their instructors to be knowledgeable and competent. Classroom technology demands that the instructor play a strong role in the classroom.

- In conventional classrooms, paper and pen are transparent tools, and our task has nothing to do with addressing how to physically write. But in a CACC, we presume some students are not fully equipped users of word processors and internet browsers.

- Students have their own views on what writing is, and what technology is good for, and it’s up to us to connect those to our ideas of discourse communities, dialect, and writing contexts.

  - Pam Takayoshi (CCCC 2004) said the vast majority of teenage girls use instant messaging, but insist that “it’s not writing.” We can use discussion boards, collaborative editing, brainstorming and free writing to help them discover that in their text messaging, they’ve been learning about audience, language choices, and effective argument.

- Instructors can use students’ computer literacy to develop their research and argumentative skills.

  - Students are used to Googling for information. We can build on their skills by creating assignments that require in-depth searches beginning at a library portal.

  - We can model strategies for assessing the reliability of web sources.

  - We can demonstrate informal and formal web search techniques and urge students to look past the first few “hits” in a library or web search.

  - Class web logs allow for discussions and digressions to flourish outside the actual classroom, and provide a means for students to work in a variety of rhetorical situations.

- Instructors can use respond quickly to essays, using word processing editing tools; this makes it easy to keep a process-oriented portfolio, and introduces students to collaborative editing and writing.

**What about Planning?**

In strategic planning, we should be looking for ways to provide peripheral needs as well as core technology:

- Better and more tech support to avoid frustration in the classroom.

- Security against theft.

- More forms of technologically enhanced instruction, including scanners, opaque projectors for hard-text viewing, web development software, and hardware for audio/visual journalism instruction.

- Ongoing professional development for instructors and formal instruction for new faculty.

- New student orientation to prepare them for using computers in their classrooms.

We also must be aware of upcoming barriers to maintaining and growing technological instruction:

**Institutional Barriers**
- Technology sucks up money. Machines are outdated in about three years. How do we maintain our commitments to classroom technology?

- If the directive to expand technology comes from above, there may be problems in developing clear pedagogical goals and enlisting faculty cooperation.

- If the directive comes from below, out of faculty initiative, some really good ideas will be put in place, but there may be wasted dollars and redundant expenditures unless the university provides some means for technologically inclined faculty to meet and discuss plans with one another.

- University networks provide secure bandwidth for academic research and instruction, administrative records, and student life. The needs of these computing communities do not shrink, and malicious attacks on network security are a constant drain on university resources. Who pays for keeping the network healthy and robust?

**Faculty Barriers**

- Physical comfort with the technology is essential. When faculty resist or don’t know how to use the technology, class time is wasted, and learning objectives are not met.

- It’s ideal to have two possible plans (high-tech, low-tech) for any given day, but that’s an unrealistic expectation. What can instructors do to cope with inevitable technological snafus?

**Student Barriers**

- Students’ use of the technology depends largely on the degree to which their instructor is willing or able to integrate computers and multimedia into lesson plans.

- Students without computers or internet access at home are marginalized. UNO provides numerous student labs, but for working, adult students, time is the factor, not access.

- Plans to require students to buy wireless-equipped laptops means shifting development burdens away from departments to students. But students sometimes can’t afford textbooks, let alone laptops.

The flow of money into educational technology is channeled by varying levels of planning and pedagogy. Technological development happens in fits and spurts, through a combination of careful design and budgetary opportunism. Strategic planning is key to ensuring technology is tightly focused on meeting student needs. In order to make coherent decisions, technology users (instructors and students) and administrators must communicate about the constant upgrading of technology components, the fluctuations of state budgets, the ongoing development of instructors, and students’ experiences with technology across the curriculum.